



Disturb the Universe: The Collected Essays of Adam Fieled

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Disturb the Universe: The Collected Essays of Adam Field

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Apologia

The guiding principle of many of these essays is simple: to pierce through the layers of mediocrity, laziness, and bad faith that cover, like a blanket, both the theoretical apparatuses and the textual practices of many modern poets. To an extent, of course, there is a degree of self-privileging at work that I am uncomfortable with: nevertheless, to state my cases in the strongest and most stringent terms necessitated that I privilege myself. A piece like “Century XX after *Four Quartets*” is broken into its own layers: the central premise, that the second half of the twentieth century saw a precipitous decline in the quality of English language poetry, is buttressed by the conviction that some boundaries between low and high art need to be reinstated. I continue to stand behind these theses, and the other 2010 essays that followed all found different ways to enumerate these conclusions. Let there be no doubt: English language poetry, as an enterprise, has reached a critical juncture. To the extent that experimental poetry is aligned with post-modernism, a new century is testing what durability post-modern theory, praxis, and texts have. What post-modern textuality lacks (spirit, narrative) is becoming significant to a substantial number of poets. The overwhelming reaction that “The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry” received on the Buffalo Poetics List is evidence of this; it was a public spectacle involving poetry and metaphysics, something that has not occurred at any other recent juncture. “On the Necessity of Bad Reviews” is more practical, yet it shares with “Decay” a sense of moral outrage at a poetry world so jaundiced against candor, progress, and distinction that anodyne and pabulum are the only palliatives. There is indeed, I hope, a moral compass at work here—necessitated by the knowledge that the brittle immorality of post-modernity needs to be held in abeyance. “Entitlements: Post-Modernity, Capitalism, and the Threat to Poetry’s History” points to some of the sources of this immorality—to the extent that artistic entitlement is taken for granted (often backed up by capitalistic interest), and history’s “slow time” unacknowledged, all the higher arts will continue to languish.

Post-modern practices enact the sense that devolution is evolution. To the extent that there can be morality in art (and moral imperatives have never been artists’ strong suits), it should be aimed at maintaining, not stability and routine, but healthy instability, a perpetual possibility of combustion in many directions. Post-modernity has seemed to impose, at least where poetry is concerned, a sense of stasis. Early essays like “Loving the Alien” and “Wordsworth @ McDonald’s” comprise attempts to work within static confines; by “The Conspiracy against Poems,” these confines have been assimilated and seen through. Thus, the progression of these essays is a head-on collision with the post-modern—first in complicity, then in confrontation, and finally in a movement towards what comes next. This is the problem that remains with us: what comes next. The answer, I hope, will be found not only in essays but in poems. But legitimate pushes come in all shapes and forms, and it is my hope that these essays have created, for fit audience though few, a context of healthy ferment.

Century XX after *Four Quartets*

(2010)

With the remnants of the twentieth century still surrounding us, it may pay dividends, as the twenty-first century takes off, to take stock of these remnants and begin to make judgments. Newly ended centuries tend to leave detritus; this can create a hostile environment for artists who wish to sew new seeds and blaze new trails. Few seem to remember that when Wordsworth and Coleridge put out *Lyrical Ballads* (though the release and dissemination of this pivotal text spanned the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century), it received hostile reviews and a good amount of indifference, as well. With hindsight, we realize that this was the text that almost single-handedly initiated British Romanticism. The early twentieth century was also inconclusive; William Butler Yeats was only beginning to receive the recognition that would lead to laurel, Walt Whitman's poems were yet to receive the blessings of posterity, while a host of lesser lights congregated around minor poets or reveled in the just-dimming glow of Decadence and Aestheticism. What do we see around us in 2010? It is a poetry world stumbling for direction, still largely lost in the theoretical wilderness of post-modernism, which espouses, among other things, the notion that distinctions between high and low art are both superfluous and illusory, that high art is the imaginary creation of hegemonic white males, and that artists can safely toss history in the dustbin and create out of momentary impulses, that have a better chance of capturing authentic effects than the backwards/forwards time-warp effect that Modernists like Eliot and Pound thought efficacious.

I would like to argue, firstly, that the demarcations between high and low art need to be reinstated. My reasons for this are manifold, but the simplest is this: I do not believe that much English language poetry composed after 1943, the year that Eliot's *Four Quartets* were released, deserves the title of high art. Before I explain why the twentieth century, post *Four Quartets*, was mostly a washout for English language poetry, let me explain what distinctions I believe subsist between high and low art. High art is defined by a sense of aesthetic balance; a host of factors must be present and accounted for; technical competence is a necessity, breadth of vision (so that any narrowness of focus is soon dissipated into fusions with larger wholes), narrative solidity (even when, as in *Four Quartets*, it is a loosely woven narrative, that makes frequent subtle shifts in different directions), and, most importantly, continued serious engagement with serious themes. If this harkens back to Matthew Arnold's emphasis on truth and seriousness, and if this seems regressive, remember that, in poetry, the impulses of post-modernism have all but flushed these constituent elements. Low art impulses often maintain a stance that technical competence is unnecessary, that breadth of vision is too ambitious, that narrative solidity is a remnant of the nineteenth century (and, to the extent that Yeats and Eliot, the only two twentieth century high art poets in the English language, had strong nineteenth century affiliations, this may be the case), and that "seriousness" is an outdated and outmoded concern. So that, the notions of high art and low art have been both displaced and misplaced, with disastrous results. We are surrounded by detritus that attempts too much with too little; that encompasses not worlds but narrow grooves; that shies away from responsible, serious engagements, or courts these engagements with such brow-beating incompetence that the matters were better left alone; and that uses sly evasions to explain its own horrendous deficits.

Back to T. S. Eliot; what is it that makes *Four Quartets* high art, and almost everything that followed in the twentieth century dross? *Four Quartets*, however sententiously, starts from a high ground; the artist is coming to grips with the limitations of living in space and time. Eliot flattens space and time out in the context of an investigation of four places, each with its own peculiar resonances, which birth separate and discrete impulses in the poet, resulting in slight shifts in perspective and emphasis. *Four Quartets* is useful, also, because it demonstrates the loosest narrative emphasis possible in a poem that attempts to achieve

and maintain the durability and permanence traces of high art. Narrative is the backbone of serious poetry; *Four Quartets* has an “I” that dictates terms, but in such a way that “I” is not an obtrusive presence. If there is an imbalance in *Four Quartets*, it is or may be a sense of oscillating perspectives that leads to a less than unitary presentation, or a loose sense of coherence that sometimes meanders away from central points. However, there is a sense that this is redeemed by a spirit of inquiry that balances philosophical concerns with concrete details, fragments of colloquial speech with natural imagery, traces of humanity’s past with visions of possible human futures. That *Four Quartets* spans all this ground does not, in and of itself, make it high art; but that Eliot’s language is taut, sinewy, disciplined, and rich makes the whole of *Four Quartets* ring as a solid, major work of high literary art. If another such work exists that was released between 1943 and 2000, I haven’t seen it.

The Objectivists, the Beats, the New York School (first and second generation), the Confessional poets—what do these poets lack, so that the appellation high art does not affix to their work, nor the appellation high artist affix to them? For many of these poets, it is the ragged lack of discipline in the language of their poems themselves. Trying to read Beat poetry is like trying to eat raw slabs of uncooked red meat. Thematically, the Beats might have been redeemed by an egalitarianism that harkened back to Whitman; formally, they were creators of tremendous Babels that are even now beginning to collapse. The Objectivists did have ambitions consonant with the approach of high artists—but their panoramic viewpoints were undermined by impoverished lines that displayed little heft, music, and which demonstrate, rather than the rawness of uncooked red meat, an overwhelming brittle dryness. The New York School poets evinced significantly more delicacy, thematically and formally, than the Objectivists and the Beats; however, the primary perpetrators of New York School poetry tended to get lost in certain extremes: either language so steeped in colloquialisms that it lost its sense of itself as art, or language so bent against narrative that it lost its sense altogether. Had the Confessional poets widened their scope, they might have gained a sense of consonance with poetry as a high art form—but the narrowness of their thematic scope precluded a sense of serious engagement with issues that transcended the personal. As such, they, along with the Objectivists, the Beats, and the New York School poets, fall squarely under the rubric that covers minor poetry and poets, when placed next to the scope and achievements of Eliot and Yeats. Other groups, like the San Francisco Renaissance poets and the Language poets, seem like a *mélange* and a mish-mash of these styles. Minor Modernists (Pound, Williams, Stevens, Stein) initiated many trends toward disjuncture and colloquialism; because the high art balance of Yeats and Eliot was (and remains) more rigorous and more difficult to achieve, it has inspired fewer immediate imitations.

High art balance, as such, depends on serious engagements with the history of poetry, and also with a sense of discernment. Though Eliot did dote upon some minor French poets, his knowledge of the history of major poetry artists, as expressed in his early essays, was complete and solid. It allowed him vantage points that set his sense of aesthetic equilibrium on a high level. Because he had the discerning impulse to separate wheat from chaff, he could accomplish the major feat of moving poetry forward in innovative ways while also conserving the best of poetry that had come before. Yeats’ engagement with history was no less complete; though he lacked the theoretical bent that defined Eliot, it would have been unthinkable for him not to know the Romantics, the Neo-Classical poets, the Metaphysical poets, Elizabethans, back to Dante, Chaucer, and beyond. Yeats also had a comprehensive knowledge of Irish mythology, which added an ancillary resource to his repertoire. Put simply: these are men that did their homework, on any number of levels. Because they maintained a sense of discipline and responsibility about their traces, moving forward meant taking history into account at each juncture. The idea that history is a flush, that the canon of English language poetry was largely created by and for white males and so has a built-in obsolescence, is pitifully shallow and ultimately pernicious. If this canon is not yet a fully multicultural canon, it is nonetheless an indispensable resource; it is the only true measure we have of how far our own arrows can sail out into the universe. Century XX encouraged poets, after 1943, to eschew the essential challenge presented by Eliot and Yeats; how to move forward and conserve at once. As the twenty-first opens, it is

this dual impulse which again presents itself as our brightest hope to rise to the challenges presented by a rich, if increasingly distant, past.

Entitlements: Post-Modernity, Capitalism, and the Threat to Poetry's History

(2010)

It is a topos that needs to be revisited periodically: capitalism is only a problem for those who have no capital. The brighter bits of Marxism reinforce and attempt to resolve this: a redistribution of goods and material wealth to level societies whose material facets have been skewered towards a chosen few. But the problem with poetry is not factory owners; with so little capital invested in poetry, "ownership" as such is more a spiritual than a material issue. The problem with poetry and poets is that you can't feel the sting of capitalism unless you have no, or little, capital; if you attempt to live off of your poetry (or even as a low-ranking academic) this will almost certainly be the case. Not too many poets have the material shrewdness to earn, through their own efforts, vast amounts of capital; what does happen is that people enter poetry (and the other arts) and are able to do so because of the capital they have inherited. This is more problematic than it appears to be at first—if you can't feel the sting of capitalism (its' greed, lack of justice, spiritual entropy), but have had to expend no effort in casting off the shackles that capitalism imposes, your relationship both to the arts and to society itself becomes so ineluctably warped that you might as well be an alien. In America, we call these folks "trust-funders." Whatever they are called, the attitude they tend to adopt in relation to poetry is one of entitlement; that they are entitled to deem their creations (however meager or nonce) poetry, to adopt an attitude of totalized complacency (without having earned it through genius or innovation), to turn workshops into exercises in egotism and readings into travesties. The attitude of entitlement fits snugly into a post-modern ethos—that art requires a minimum of effort, that any hokey contrivance can, will, and does pass for art, and that the only absolute is simple: capital can and will buy status. That's the post-modern spirit (which is, of course, a blatant oxymoron); to the funded go the spoils. Marxism works for many poets because they've never had the experience of having no capital, so they don't see or feel its dark edges—conspicuous consumption has engendered an ethos of complete indulgence. Entitlement means that, no matter what these poets create, it has to be as good as anyone else's creations: they're as good (of course) as Keats, or Yeats, or Eliot. Post-modern capitalism looks in the check-book rather than the history books to see what the balance is; high numbers take the place of high thoughts.

So the approach that many poets have to Marxism is twice-removed from Marxism in its pure state: by a surfeit of capital, and by a self-satisfaction that accepts and encourages the existent capitalistic system (implicitly, if not explicitly). Poetry becomes a business like any other—if you do good business (manifested in book sales, reading attendance, blog numbers, Google hits, or votes on Goodreads), and if what is quantifiable works in your favor, you are entitled to assume parity with anything or anyone. What is a poet (or an artist) legitimately entitled to? Not much. If you are serious about what you do, if you are not caught in a welter in which post-modern and capitalistic ethos creates a bogus sense of validity, you know that genuine imposition can only be created by history (assuming you are not imposed upon too much by material circumstances). History, if viewed properly, takes back entitlements. The flimsy history created by post-modernity contrives to impose an intimidating veneer; but a lack of real engagement with history creates a sense of the ephemeral which, if not embraced, (and post-modernists do express consonance with the "ephemeral" as such) must be rejected absolutely. Many post-modern equations are simple: "incorporate or perish" is one. What, beyond creating an imposing veneer, constitutes post-modern "incorporation"? Nothing. Post-modernists, for what's often an obvious reason, feel entitled to stop at the surface; the reason is that a persistent sense of entitlement inhibits and destroys human depth. Deprivation often engenders depth—if you have never been deprived, it is difficult to imagine a need for depth. And if you espouse and embrace Marxist levels of material engagement, but fail to connect them to your own existence and begin to take some personal responsibility for it, you become a kind of sham factory owner.

Anyone in the arts who has not inherited funds the way that you have becomes an underling. Underlings can be brushed aside; what begins as warped Marxism becomes straightforward Darwinian obduracy. Simply put, the arts aren't fair, and they never have been. What post-modernity imposes is a context in which there is not only no justice in who "gets in," there is no justice in what they feel they are entitled to do when/if they do get in. What do they feel entitled to do, more often than not?

Post-modernity often seems to represent an infinite regress towards oblivion; a plummet that never ends, and in which any kind of ascension becomes the butt of arrogant laughter; if history and art don't matter, and if you happen to be an artist, satisfaction arises not from what you create but in the sense of entitlement that justifies creating nothing. As much as Marxism is embraced, senses of base and superstructure in this grow confused; there can be no modes of production if what you produce is an acknowledged nothing. One gist of post-modernism is that there is no base—because, we are told, the idea of a "base" in art is a hokey contrivance, and there is no point in actually producing anything (except to preserve appearances.) So why be an artist at all? The reason is simple: because it's easy. Entitlement, if taken to an extreme (as it often is) negates a sense of responsibility. Do whatever you want; who cares? As the flush ethos dictates, check your numbers, throw out some more red herrings, everything's fine. But the depth engendered by deprivation has a difficult time accepting this—and post-modernity, like every other paradigmatic movement in the history of the arts, must end. While there is no sure sign that a nascent depth is going to permanently erode the foundations of post-modernism, it is doubtless that different eras require different artistic modes of production to hold a mirror up to dynamic circumstances. In Western life today, a sense of anti-dynamism, of stasis, has been put in place by harsh economic circumstances. It is likely that the post-modernists will respond to this in the same manner that they responded to fin de siècle entropy—with more acknowledged nothings, bolstered (at times and only in bits) by theories that dictate the shrewd and compelling nature of nothings, to reflect back the nothingness that will have been imposed on us if we have borne the brunt of these circumstances. In other words, post-modernism's potency and efficacy are crippled by the complete material security that enfolds many of its' constituents. We need something new right now.

Are any of us entitled to a new movement that evinces more depth and more engagement on more levels? We are not. But to the extent that one seed may be put into place (and with the hope that the seed may grow), I will say that what we need is to move upwards, towards some kind of affirmation, rather than towards new and greater levels of oblivion (born, more often than not, from obliviousness). Those who have inherited money often inherit nothing from history; those who have to create their own lives may create something worthy to be inherited, that has consonance with the more developed moments in art's history. In this context, the important thing is that nothing is to be closed, and what is created is a mystery that each artist must resolve for him or herself. No one should be entitled to anything but the right to create; the world owes none of us anything, not even this. That the right to create should be earned is something that post-modernity has completely lost touch with; that material wealth is, itself, a red herring where the arts are concerned is something that needs to be looked into. But if something is to rise, and shortly, from the ashes of a fading post-modern regime, let's hope that when/if we have earned our places, it is because we know that in art, there is no way to earn anything but through intense and devoted labor.

On the Necessity of Bad Reviews

(2009)

The attitudes prevalent in the poetry world today have created an atmosphere in which bad reviews of poetry books are (for the most part) unacceptable. The phenomenon of the poetry review-as-puff-piece takes place in a wide variety of contexts—online journals and blogs, print journals, press releases, and anthologies. The poetry protocol of gathering positive quotes to use on book jackets fits squarely under this rubric. I would like to opine that this trend, which encourages clannishness, reinforces coterie affiliations, and establishes poetry as a lightweight art-form, is largely negative and needs to be changed. Even popular music contexts encourage more healthy debate, where aesthetics are concerned, than poetry does. Aesthetic debates in poetry tend to be “my group against your group,” a struggle for uncontested hegemony, rather than the productive arguments that initiated movements like British Romanticism and Modernism, and resulted in stunning new work. “Soft poetry culture” necessitates that interviewers ask easy questions, older poets are surrounded by fawning sycophants, while younger poets jockey for position based on their connections and alliances. For poetry to become a culturally heavyweight art-form again, poets (especially the ones being nurtured in MA and MFA programs) need to be taught to question their teachers, challenge poetry systems, and (perhaps most importantly) to write both good reviews and negative ones. The poetry world suffers from a dearth of angry young men and women, of rebels and revolutionaries. The first question that arises from these assertions is a crucial one—if “soft poetry culture” is predominant, how and why did it become this way? The answers are complex and myriad—nevertheless, a tentative investigation may be fruitful if it is agreed that these issues are, in fact, issues, and important ones.

Most poets in this day and age have some affiliation with academia. If you are reading a modern poet’s book, there is a very good chance that the poet has not only a university degree but an advanced degree (usually an MFA or MA) as well. The relationship between poetry and academia has become so entwined that it may no longer be worthwhile to investigate whether or not this basic association itself is healthy or unhealthy. What, exactly, are poets being taught in these programs? Programs vary widely, and it would be absurd to generalize; nonetheless, I have both an MFA and an MA, one from a conservative institution, one from a liberal institution. This puts me in a unique position to comment on this situation. I do so, enjoining the caveat that I welcome both commentary and dissent, and that there may or may not be representativeness to my experiences. I have found conservative and liberal poets to be roughly 70% similar; they tend to credit themselves with much more differential than is actually there. Both sides cling very closely to coteries and coterie affiliations; both tend to encourage their students to accept their pronouncements uncritically. In my experience, poetry teachers at this level tend to only use “hardness” (hard pedagogical techniques) to keep others soft. Soft poetry culture dictates a strict master/servant relationship in these contexts—masters can be as hard as they want, servants (students) must remain soft. In more exacting disciplines (the natural sciences, for example), this division is more necessary—answers can be proven, things need to be learnt. But in art, which has as its ontological foundation what might be called “total subjectivities” (no one can prove what works, what does not, and even master narratives often come down to people’s opinions), master/slave dynamics are not only unproductive but actively unhealthy. Liberal poets, I have found, are 30% more genuinely liberal than conservative poets, and 70% as pigheaded, domineering, and coercive. Investigation of these issues becomes like playing with Russian dolls; opening up one issue leads directly to the discovery of another one. What leads poetry teachers in these programs to disseminate soft poetry culture through hard tactics? If it has the effect of softening sensibilities, why do sensibilities need to be softened?

I wrote, in a preface to *Ocho #11*, that poetry is a tough gig, and it is. Material rewards are scarce, competition is fierce, and tremendous dedication is required to even get a foot in the door. Those who have the good fortune to become successful in poetry tend to be warped by the atmosphere of deprivation that surrounds poetry endeavors. The line between those who are successful and those who are not can be thin indeed. Poets are fiercely protective of their little domains (and they usually are very little indeed), and this fiercely protective instinct gets enacted by a process and an impulse not unlike what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “demarcative imperative.” Those who are above are forced by ambiguous circumstances to say they are above, and to enact this superiority. Students must be softened into receptivity—a student reacting to hardness with hardness would be an impermissible threat, in a radically unstable, ambiguous context. This is how soft poetry culture is perpetuated—through the hardness of teachers. And it is through teachers that students often obtain their first publication opportunities. Thus, young poets become “foot soldiers” for their teachers—they are soft meat, determined to carry the torches that have been passed down to them. Because so many poetry contexts are predicated on regionally or aesthetically dominant coterie, to break out of these rigid structures is a task indeed, and one younger poets are not encouraged to undertake. “Toe the line,” goes the master narrative that dictates so much of younger poets’ behavior, “and you will be rewarded; expressions of individualism will lead to irreversible exile status. It is softest (and most rewarding) to conform.”

Textual expressions of conformity often take the form of puff-piece reviews. In an unspoken fashion, this becomes a mode of “playing the game,” which necessitates perpetual softness. It also must be noted that “screaming at the other side” (who may or may not be listening) of the liberal/conservative, experimental/mainstream divide does not necessarily qualify as hardness. It reinforces a poet’s own coterie associations, and is often used as a tactic to draw attention to one’s self. Honest looks at those within one’s own domain are hard to come by, and this fact prohibits poetry from becoming as rigorous (formally and thematically) as it could be. Students beaten into softness are so terrified of losing their little places that criticism of what immediately surrounds them would be unthinkable. Combat (perverse as this sounds) needs to start at home; conflict and warrior skills should not merely be aimed at distant enemies. Conflict within coterie should be encouraged; individualism needs both to be espoused and practiced by teachers. Taking this a step further, the question remains as to what a more ideal (or “heavyweight”) poetry world would look like. Why would, not a dominant strain of bad reviews, but a balance of good and bad reviews, inject new life into an art-form that many people have given up for dead?

Young artists need to have teeth, bite, and guts. To the extent that young artists are being taught that teeth, bite, and guts (and I will resist the temptation to get academic with these words, as commonsense definitions apply) are negative, undesirable attributes, the poetry world looks (at least from a distance) like a realm of stilted pabulum. Non-poets tend to think of poetry as boring; it often is. Artists that work in other mediums actively employ the works of canonical poets, while eschewing works of contemporary poets, for a simple reason: because contemporary poets are not good enough (this applies to everything from R. B. Kitaj’s usage of Eliot to Lady Gaga’s fascination with Rilke). Older poets have had their shot; the decades to come may show to what extent they have or have not succeeded in their endeavors. But the real fate of modern poetry is in the hands of younger poets, who (whether they realize it or not) do have options. One healthy option to explore is the possibility that an approach grounded, not in softness or hardness alone, but in a balance of softness and hardness (as manifested both in poems and in reviews), would be conducive to the growth of healthy, diverse poetry contexts, which could transcend the usual coterie prejudices. As a final confession, I will say this: I have written my share of puff-pieces. But the time has ended in which I can do this in good conscience; and to the extent that I feel writing negative reviews could, in some sense, be productive, I will be willing to get the hatchet out.

Wordsworth @ McDonald's

(2005)

With the advent of the Information Superhighway, cell-phones, and other Digital Now-signifiers, we have entered an era in which *all reality is virtual*. Poets who give serious thought to the *why* of their craft are faced w/ a dilemma: how to create poems in the Wordsworthian manner (i.e. *real language of people*) when technology has outmoded the Romantic model that still dictates so much serious poetry. Language poetry schematized a new model—oblique, skewed, post-modern. This model was a useful innovation that has, in roughly thirty years time, grown stale and somewhat irrelevant. Poets, & what's left of their audience, still want the Wordsworthian model to hold. They want feeling to be relevant & language to enact a mimesis of interior (*real*) processes. The problem is, that if we acknowledge a central *virtual quality* to modern life, *real language* may be an impossibility.

So, we can't depend completely on Wordsworth anymore. For the creation of *virtual poetry*, it will be necessary for the poet to internalize things ordinarily seen as epitomizing crassness & "low" reality—like McDonald's. As one sits in McDonald's circa 2005, it becomes clear that agile minds are working to keep the corporate axles greased—minds from which it is possible to learn. Hanging in the window, a large picture advertising chicken strips; a young African-American male dangling one in front of parted lips, beaming; inscribed on the blank space above his head, a motto: "*I'm lovin' it*". This is obviously rhetorical, in that the "I" here is general & universalized. "I" is all of us, in the contented bliss of a chicken-strip meal. So, McDonald's is subtle enough to posit an "I" that really means "you". How many poets left in America can say the same? How many poets are so subtle, so engaged, so *virtual* that their "I's" resonate as "yous"? Poets want a perpetual striking of Wordsworth's bell; they still believe in "real language" (even Language poets inherently must believe before they deconstruct); their "I's" stay isolate, separate, derelict. Let's set up a small chart & enumerate exactly the binary being portrayed here:

Wordsworth (*language/ real men*)

gender-specific, un-PC (language/men)
static/abstract
definitely serious-intentioned

McDonald's (*I'm lovin' it*)

gender-neutral, PC (I)
"I" *In medias res*
moderately serious

Immediately it becomes apparent that the McDonald's ad execs are, on some level, more linguistically sharp than us, the poets. Their motto is PC, active, & moderately serious, where Wordsworth is sexist, static, & excessively serious. What I'm calling for is a poetics equal parts Wordsworth & McDonald's. Post-modernists would resolve this binary tension by making a mockery of it (especially the Wordsworth half), in an attempt to reinforce an ethos of "virtuality" or "nothing real". Though reality has grown to be (arguably) virtual, I am looking for an earnest attempt to implement both sides of this binary, the Wordsworth & the McDonald's, the "I" that's "I" & the "I" that's "you", the static & the active, definite & moderate seriousness. This does not preclude irony & slant; rather, they become a tool to express underlying profundities. What's needed to achieve balance is *Negative Rhetopoeiac Capability*. That is, a poem must attempt to straddle the Wordsworth/McDonald's binary without irritably grasping after rhetorical reason, or making a mockery of either side. This ensures a poetics both *actively virtual* & *substantially real*.

Some of these Frank O'Hara bits are illustrative of successful work in this vein:

I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and

casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with
her face on it.

Leroi comes in
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
disease but we don't give her one we
don't like terrible diseases.

O'Hara's conversational diction fulfills Wordsworth binary-end, even as his affirmative, ebullient voice veers into "*I'm lovin' it*" territory (*in medias res, active, performative*). This is "serious ephemeral" poetry, using Pop Culture references as quotidian signifiers that nevertheless have substantial internal ("felt") relevance. O'Hara, though he skirts post-modern (or "Pop") territory, does not make a mockery of anything—he's kidding, but he isn't, he's at McDonald's reading Wordsworth, he is where we want to be.

O'Hara's oeuvre as a whole is useful, because O'Hara has a key "Wordsworth McDonald's" quality that most serious poets lack—"charm". His poems, in their moderately serious/actively engaging tenor, are *charming*. Why wouldn't Wordsworth at McDonald's be charming? Can you imagine the Bard of Tintern Abbey reckoning a "Solitary Milkshake", finding himself overwhelmed by a spontaneously felt Big Mac? O'Hara's charm comes from unexpected juxtapositions charged w/ feeling. He is, in this sense, a good Wordsworthian—but *he lives in the present moment, always*. Dualism is manifested as whim. Modern signifiers are internalized, processed, felt. So, McDonald's has led us from Wordsworth to Frank O'Hara, who was virtual before virtual became real. He instinctively navigated a Mannerist-space that has yet to be pursued by a substantial number of serious poets (who perhaps mistrust his merely *moderate* seriousness). Yet, poets who lean & cling to Wordsworthian "reality" can often be heard complaining about lack of interest. Poets who want to achieve something *real* in this day & age really have no choice but to *get Mannerist*. Mannerism is differentiated from Pop (and the post-modern ethos that followed in its' wake) in this way—Pop is a Campbell's Soup can, Mannerism is a Campbell's Soup can *held by Michelangelo's David*. Mannerism includes Formal Rigor, depth, gravitas (Wordsworth virtues) along with spontaneous, active, Pop-based signifiers and imagery (McDonald's).

Claiming an essential *virtuality* to modern life needs some justification. What I mean to say is that image/technology-saturation has become so rampant in Western society that even those of us who'd like to lead pure, uncluttered, Wordsworth-style existences have cell-phones, use the Internet, watch TV & movies, etc. Cell-phone communication seems particularly distressing, substituting expedience for intimacy (transpiring as it does while we are "multi-tasking"), breaking down boundaries (anyone w/ our number can reach us anytime, so long as we keep our phones on), often poisoning our relationship to the *Now* by taking us out of the present moment. So, imagine—one is at a dinner party, adjourned to the living room to watch (if we are lucky) something by Cocteau or Godard. Our cell-phone rings; we're expecting an important (perhaps career-related) call; we answer. We are living in three realms—dinner party, Cocteau, cell-phone—at once. These situations have become familiar and common to most of us. They happen all the time, and they (for me at least) have added up to a feeling of alienation from the *essential presence of the Now*. This is especially pertinent for city-dwellers. The unreality/virtual component goes way up, it's hard to feel solid with a flux not only in the outside world but in one's hand-bag and one's computer. When I speak of an encroachingly preponderant *virtual world*, that's what I mean.

Poets must address this situation *precisely*. When Wordsworth, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, spoke of "gross stimulants" contaminating mass aesthetic judgment, could he even have fathomed our current level

of emotional dispossession and image-centered “savage torpor”? I’m all for a poetry that confronts this head-on by using some of it! The architect Robert Venturi says, “*Viva Mannerism that richly acknowledges ambiguity and inconsistency in a complex and contradictory time.*” Maybe we could go so far as to call O’Hara a “Mannerist”—his exaggerated reactions and humor, his implicit ethos of “*mess is more*”. McDonald’s “I’m lovin’ it” also has the essential Mannerist hyperbolizing spirit. Wordsworth, the sober, steady *philosophe*, was obviously no Mannerist—but why not keep some of his level-headed piety regarding art’s pleasure-giving, insight-shedding mission, his emotion-cherishing mind?

To me, it’s a question of letting in. Don’t write off McDonald’s for its’ Mannerist modernity or Wordsworth for his Romantic self-absorption—rather, let them both in *equally*, so that what we produce is contemporary *and* durable, Mannerist *and* tradition-preserving, face-to-face intimate *and* cell-phone expedient. O’Hara was, as far as I can tell, the greatest master at absorbing modernity-signifiers in such a way that he represented them without condescension, and with a loving eye. This has obvious ties to Warhol, Pop-art in general, Rauschenberg’s Combine-paintings, etc. Mannerism, however, has grounding in tradition that Pop lacks. Pop did away with the past in embracing glossy surfaces; Mannerism wants the glossy surface *and* the earthy depth. It’s an impossibly ambitious stratagem for a new urban poetics—but why not?

Loving the Alien

(2006)

Poetics involves both “transcription” and “recollection”, exteriors internalized and interiors exteriorized. Each process involves the assimilation of interior and exterior elements, “the ineffable In of Out and Out of In”. Maybe we could call this point of in/out convergence *meta-rational*. We recognize the “rightness” of Out becoming In and In becoming Out, but we don’t know exactly how or why it happens. Pursuant to this, it’s possible to construct a neat little binary from the compositional theories of Jack Spicer and William Wordsworth. On the one hand, we have Spicer, “spooky” California *poet maudit*, with his transcription theory—everything worthy to be written is “dictated” by an unknown (alien) Other. On the other hand, Romantic man-of-Earth Wordsworth posits a poetry of recollection (introspective and otherwise). Wordsworth’s famous “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is ancillary to this. Yet, if we throw Jack and William into a dialectic blender, we see that each theory leaves something unaccounted for; transcription must be done from an inside (with what Spicer calls “furniture”, whether the space is den or living room apparently doesn’t matter), and recollection must be inspired by outside things (Tintern Abbeys or Candlestick Parks, numinous or sub-numinous things-in-themselves). It becomes clear that Wordsworth and Spicer fit together like puzzle pieces, but the puzzle is larger than them.

Certain things seem apparent. If we “transcribe”, it’s because we feel the Martians have something worth saying (else why would we do it?) Let’s call this “Martian empathy”. The Martian isn’t strictly Other, but is both potentially comprehensible and definitely social; “transcription” is, in a sense, “recollection” of our interactions with the Martians. The dialectic knot tightens and the meta-rational comes into play again; we feel the “rightness” of the interaction without seeing how it is or isn’t logically determined. Conversely, “recollection” is transcription of outside things (persons or the inanimate Natural forms Wordsworth loves), what they’ve “told” us merely by existing in the manner they do. This is the “language of voiceless things”, not Martians but certainly things that aren’t “given” to human consciousness, things that can only be “seen into” with conscious effort. Because the experience is heightened and changed during the compositional process, “recollection” is also meta-rational. The raw experience is “charged into life” by being put in verse, by the “spontaneous overflow” that may or may not have been felt at the “encounter point”, but which is discovered in recollection (“mind associating ideas in a state of excitement”). What transcription and recollection share is the experience of the alien becoming familiar in a moment of meta-rationality.

Spicer’s poem “Thing Language” bears this out:

This ocean, humiliating in its’ disguises
Tougher than anything.
No one listens to poetry. The ocean
Does not mean to be listened to. A drop
Or crash of water. It means
Nothing.
It
Is bread and butter
Pepper and salt. The death
That young men hope for. Aimlessly
It pounds the shore. White and aimless signals. No
One listens to poetry.

Spicer uses “ocean” as a metaphor for the vast universal body of poetry, “art-language”. There must be some “recollection” here—that the ocean is “tougher than anything” is a subjective pre-value judgment, obviously born out of lived (“recollected”) experience. The only way to know how tough the ocean is is to swim in it! Spicer’s poet-life, rather than his Martian-encounters (however indistinguishable the two may seem to him) allow him the luxury of this large, authoritative utterance. He’s “recollecting in tranquility” the tumultuousness of the creative process. Any feeling of a “beyond-Jack” speaking through him would not be distinguishable to even a preternaturally close reader. Likewise “no one listens to poetry”, a maxim meant rhetorically with years of hard poet-living behind it. The Martians, should they have dictated this to him, would’ve been telling him what he already knew (and had worked into gist-rhetoric) before. Tinges of Mannerism here, “I’m lovin’ it” grandiosity transposed into a minor key (and intermixed with a few flatted fifths)—the exaggeration of “tougher than anything” and “no one”. The poem fits in so well with what Spicer said in his lectures (poetry as meaningless conglomerate of contingencies, not for pleasure, essentially a negative apparition), that one feels the presence of a hyper-personal “schtick” that Spicer developed in all areas of his literary practice. The hyper-personal is what Spicer wanted most to avoid, maybe because he knew that it’d be impossible. The boundaries between “Zen emptiness” and hyper-personality are paper thin—both are exaggerated (“Mannerist”) states, extremes. The “ocean”, seen in its’ totality, has a “blankness”—the subject objectifying the ocean, on the other hand, has only his developed sense of self (“personality”) with which to counter (or reflect or balance) the blankness. Spicer isn’t *in* the poem but directly *behind* it, which is really just as visible. The bind of ineluctable “Self-hood” was familiar to him, “transcription” being the surest antidote. Yet the obvious preponderance of recollection (at least in “Thing Language”) makes the entire intellectual construct behind “transcription” seem strained.

On to W. W. Here’s his famous short poem “A slumber did my spirit seal”:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

First, a digression...one way “transcription” is supposed to happen is through metaphor. The spirits “told” Yeats (in the anecdote delivered by Spicer in his lectures) “We’re giving you metaphors for your poetry”. That would be a good “furniture arranging strategy”, no? Wordsworth’s poem is (it seems to me) essentially metaphoric—“slumber” is a metaphor for lover/love interest (possibly “Lucy”, could be anyone), revealed in third-person signifying “she” used from the third line on. A love affair, or “being in love”, awakens us on certain levels, on others “puts us to sleep”. So, while part of the poem is “recollection” (Wordsworth is talking, albeit metaphorically, about a relationship he’s had), in using “slumber” as abstract personal pronoun (highly unusual for him), one could argue that Wordsworth was mitigated by Martian influence, i.e. he was transcribing a metaphor the Martians gave him.

The difference that leans me towards Wordsworth’s base position (poem-as-recollection) is that, while the metaphor used in this poem might be Martian inspired (transcribed), everything else about it (its’ tone, form, subject and object) came from Wordsworth’s furniture (recollection-material). Both transcription and recollection are often operative in poetry, but recollection is both more necessary and more ubiquitous. Poets write about what they know about and what they know about is their furniture. Spicer’s error was to choose the metaphor of something inanimate (furniture) for what is actually *most animate* in the poet’s

consciousness. This is what we can classify as all “recollection material”—thoughts, feelings, dreams, whims, etc. Transcription becomes problematic if the Martians have to deal with *reactive*, rather than *inactive* material. Not that Spicer’s perceived Other isn’t a provocative thought—it is—just that Wordsworth’s ideas have superior grounding and superior relevance. You can get away from transcription anytime you like (maybe even use your favorite lines), but recollection is unavoidable. This begs the question that each poet must answer for him or herself—to what extent should Martians be sought? They do seem to have some good ideas.

The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry

(2010)

Artists that live in the western world in this day and age are often forced to confront dominant strains of materialism, greed, and capitalistic interest. To an extent, poets get the worse end of this bargain—unable to make a living from their work, forced to support themselves by means that might be distasteful to them, surrounded by influences that anathematize the values they hope to embody. Yet poets, like everyone else, are themselves dominated by social interests which make the interests of those around them difficult to avoid. We must live in society; not only that, but because we must subsist through means that are not (for the most part) generated by our work, we must participate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the materialism, greed, and capitalistic interests that run rampant through the majority of the population of the respective societies we inhabit. The chameleonic tendency of poets (and of artists in general) has been widely noticed; unfortunately, many poets take on stripes that sully the spiritual essence of the duties they perform when they compose. We cannot shut the world out, but by letting it in we corrupt ourselves; this has always been true of poets and other artists to some extent, but it is especially so in 2010. Even as the Internet has revitalized certain aspects of poetic practice, the forces of greed have grown more extreme as recession has swept Europe and the States, making resources scarce and even minor material gains hard-won. It is not surprising, then, that strains of materialism prevalent in western societies have infiltrated poets' texts. What are these strains, and how do they operate?

The theories of Karl Marx have exerted a powerful influence on the few preceding generations of experimental poets, but it is a more ambiguous influence than has been generally noticed. Because Marx espouses the replacement of capitalistic materialism with another kind of materialism (the material domination of the working classes), what we have in Marx is a kind of meta-materialism, that feeds on itself, with anything transcendental presumed guilty until proven innocent. Poets that subscribe to Marxist tenets have political agendas; poetry becomes an agent to fight capitalism. But this poetry still has its intellectual roots in a materialism that is more or less complete. That there might be other aspects to reality than the material; that consciousness is vaster than merely material perceptions can encompass; that the transcendentalism that would ascribe to the visible world an incomplete-at-best importance; these schemas, often dismissed as Romantic and thus regressive, are denied outright. What is, is—poetry that seeks to affirm this wants to embody text as a sole agent, a kind of material, that can, of its own essence, create worthwhile, substantial, memorable poems. It would be precipitate to assert that there is no spirituality whatsoever in the poetry of the American Language poets, for example: but that this spirituality is one that denies that “spirit” is, in all its ontological nebulosity, an important agent in poetic practice, would be difficult to deny. Poets with Marxist leanings bridle at words like “soul” and “spirit”; they perceive these words as tokens of delusion, demonstrations of an inability to face the concrete realities of the world and thus to have contemporary efficacy. Looking beyond Marx, some generations of experimental poets have also sought to embody the relationship to language initiated by the Deconstructionists of the late twentieth century. This consummated relationship is, I feel, less a success (and I do believe the Marxist poets understand Marx) than a misunderstanding.

There is, I believe, a spiritual essence inherent in Deconstructionist philosophy that is often ignored. The Deconstructionists, with, among others, Jacques Derrida, leading the pack, saw in language a kind of dissolution of subjectivity, a movement subjects could make from unitary realities to realms that encompassed more than subjectivity alone could hold. It would be amiss to ascribe any kind of transcendental aim to Deconstructionism, especially where subjectivity is concerned; and there exists a chance that Deconstructionists might have been even less comfortable with words like “soul” and “spirit”

than Marxists were. But that language itself is an arbitrary system leading to an infinite regress, balanced with the realization that words are tactile objects that are capable of containing, in their infinite admixtures, entire worlds; can, potentially, lead to a relationship with language that has a more than invisible connection to realms of subjectivity and transcendental engagement than is commonly supposed. The notion of Romantic Deconstructionism is absurd; but that Deconstructionism does not necessarily negate all forms of transcendental engagement has been misunderstood by experimental poets, who seek to evacuate all hints of anything transcendental from their texts, seemingly forgetting that poetry and philosophy serve very different functions, and fulfill very different ends. To be short: just as there is a lexicon that serious philosophers have a right to use (and this formulation is, admittedly, rather overdetermined), there is a lexicon that poets have a right to use, and the inheritance of words like “soul” and “spirit” from our forefathers is a worthwhile one. Certain poets have used Deconstruction as a pretext to shun a serious, responsible engagement with the history of poetry; beneath their decimating gazes, centuries have been emptied of worth and meaning, and little fads of disjuncture and paratactic repetition have taken root as valuable. Without calling for a precise return to the Romantic, poetry needs to derive what spiritual seeds there are from Deconstructionism (and they are considerable, though they may have been unintended as traces), not to evade the serious tools that poets toil with to create meaning: narrative, the body, human relationships, and the levels that trace all of these things, horizontally and vertically.

I do not presume to demonstrate that poets do or do not have “souls.” What I will say is that the metaphysical is part of our inheritance that needs to be reengaged. It is not only an efficacious way of connecting ourselves to our forefathers; it is an efficacious way of doing something more urgent, and more necessary: through these investigations, we can begin the work of separating ourselves from the debacles of capitalism, now that it has subsumed so much of the western world. There is a level on which we are shying away from a direct engagement with the materialism of our respective societies by doing this; but that our narratives may draw from both levels, from an engagement that is also a disengagement simultaneously, has not yet been explored to a great extent. I foresee a return to spirituality that is not merely (or entirely) a rejection of Marxist and Deconstructionist thought, but a hybrid that uses all of these elements to make larger mosaics; poems that read like the great literary narratives that have sustained literary communities for centuries, from Dante to Goethe, from the British Romantics to James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. This, that I envision, is not a return but a movement outward into something more expansive, more developed, and more encompassing than anything that was created by an English-language poet in the second half of the twentieth century.

Anything with an Edge: Rethinking Post-Avant

(2009)

Many definitions have been posited for post-avant. There was a flurry of action about five months ago, in which I and a handful of other poets had it out over what post-avant means and what it does not. It was my impression that no general consensus was reached, and that much had been said but little of it had a substantial impact. This goes, certainly, for the things I said too; I do not privilege my own formulations here. Nonetheless, I think the discussion is a worthwhile one, and thinking about it has led me to some new conclusions. Here is the original definition I posited for post-avant: *the diasporic movement of Lang-Po towards a new synthesis with erotic and narrative elements*. That's roughly it. What I have been thinking over the last week is slightly different, and simpler. It is defining post-avant poetry as *anything with an edge*. This begs some immediate questions. What do we mean when we say that a poem, or a book of poems, *has an edge*? How do we strictly define *edgy poetry*? Colloquially, if it is said that something has an edge, it usually denotes that it is pointed, direct, sharp, and that it skirts the uncomfortable or the unsettling. It may deal, thematically, with a difficult issue, or it may take an unusual stance on an issue that has become stuck in a rut of settled representations. One obvious historical example would be Shakespeare's sonnet *My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun...*, which takes Petrarchan conventions and turns them on their heads. Or, the way Pound conflates two seemingly irreconcilable disparates in *In a Station of the Metro*, creating an unlikely synthesis of urban and rural imageries. Perhaps, owing to the sophisticated games played in his sonnets, we could call Shakespeare the first post-avant poet. Why not?

What else is *edgy*, pointed, direct, and sharp? I might be useful to name some things that are *not* edgy, but that tend to bear the post-avant moniker. Lazy disjunctive writing is, for me, *not* post-avant, *specifically because it has no edge*. *Having an edge necessarily connotes making some kind of sense*. It is hard, actually, to have any kind of thematic element included at all, if you do not make any narrative sense. I have no intention of picking on anyone in particular, but we all know lazy disjunctive writing (most of us know it a mile away) and it is not difficult to see that by this new definition, it does not fit under the rubric of post-avant. Epiphanic poetry, anything that relies on sentiment, would obviously not be post-avant, in these terms. How about spoken word poetry? That is a tough nut to crack; good spoken word poetry certainly has an edge, certainly carries thematic elements, so it would be hard-going to deny it a place in post-avant. What needs to be discussed is how stringently standards of *formal rigor* are applied to post-avant. If no standards are applied, someone could get onstage at a reading and say *shit fuck piss* ten times and be post-avant. All those tired arguments about "serious" poetry versus "performance" poetry need to be dragged out of the closet for the thousandth time; we have to find ourselves making distinctions and setting boundaries that might be unreal. I have no intention of laying down my version of the law; but where performance poetry is concerned, inclusion under the aegis of post-avant cannot, I think, be taken for granted. Which may, unfortunately, invalidate the *anything with an edge* tag-line. Or maybe not. The beauty of dealing with a new movement is that it is still amorphous and, if you are lucky (which I may or may not be), you can do your bit to shape it.

I affixed a picture of Frank O'Hara to this post because (perhaps this is a bit obvious) *anything with an edge* follows directly from *going on your nerve*. Why is it that O'Hara (along with few others) gets respect from *both major sides* of the American poetry landscape? How is it possible to be loved by both Billy Collins and Language Poets? There are myriad reasons, but I would say that a major one is the deft manner in which O'Hara creates *narratives that have an edge*. New York City created O'Hara just as surely as Paris created Baudelaire; O'Hara's version of Negative Capability meant creating poetry that mirrored, as precisely as possible, the edginess of New York street-life mid-century XX. If O'Hara was a kind of conduit, this was

facilitated by the seeming impetuosity of his poems. Is "anything with an edge" impetuous? Not necessarily. But the element of conscious craft and "edginess," taken as an indicator of aesthetic worth, make uneasy bedfellows. On the other hand, the tension between uneasy bedfellows can make for interesting poetry. There is no way to seal this thing up in one post (and blog-posts are often themselves "go on your nerve" exercises); but I think the idea of post-avant and *anything with an edge* could lead to a fruitful discussion, especially because it gets boring writing *a diasporic movement...* over and over again. I have always felt that O'Hara's best poetry *started something that has not yet been finished*. How would O'Hara feel about potentially having started a movement? Well, he did Personism already, so technically this would be the second movement...the more (I hope he would say) the merrier! I hope to go into what constitutes "edginess" and "anything with an edge" in days to come.

Book Review: Jordan Stempleman's *Facings*

(2008)

When comparisons regarding poetry and poets become an issue, it is easy to remember a cliché that, in the manner of the best clichés, always seems applicable: *comparisons are odious*. Yet comparing things is both central to poetic practice (for those of us hardy enough to go in for a good simile or metaphor now and then) and critical practice as well. Put simply, comparisons are how a vigorous literary mind works. We are able to make sense of what is new by comparing it to older things. It works if you reverse the equation, too; as T. S. Eliot noted in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," remarkable new works transform and transmute our conceptions of older masterpieces (if we posit that there are, in fact, poems good enough to be considered general masterpieces.) It would seem that, if comparisons are odious, we, as poets and critics, had better get used to the unpleasant smell of ourselves and of others. Or, we could throw the cliché out the window, working under the assumption that throwing clichés out the window is part of our job anyway. That's probably better.

All these issues have been going through my head as I've read, re-read, and re-read Jordan Stempleman's *Facings*, which was put out by Otoliths in 2007. Not only have I been tempted to compare it to things, but there is one specific, generally regarded masterpiece that I've been tempted to compare it to: John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. All the same, I've been wary about this comparison. Those are some mighty big boots to fill, and I do not believe that absolute, unequivocal parity has been established. Nevertheless, all of *Facings* is of a high quality, and a handful of the poems do, in fact, compare (and achieve parity or near-parity) with the poems in Ashbery's book. Thematically, Stempleman and Ashbery cover much of the same ground: alienation, isolation, displacement (sexual, emotional, spiritual, what have you), and the theme that would bind them both to *Four Quartets* era Eliot (to extend the comparative reach), temporality.

I believe it may be best, when one is being ambitious and daring, to get down to brass tacks as quickly as possible. Here, quoted in full, is a poem from Stempleman's book, called "The Apartment":

He asked, who lives there,
then brought over his
laundry, covered all the
windows with socks, his old
t-shirts, pillowcases now
separated from their sheets.
The day seemed to go on
forever. The sunlight, and only
the sunlight, almost made its way
through, went on trying to get in
for a very long time.

We see a move here that Ashbery often makes: the placement of a character that remains unnamed, never "takes on flesh," and is surrounded by images of implosion and desolation. An obvious example from *Self-Portrait* would be "A Man of Words," with its memorable opening lines, "His case inspires interest / But little sympathy; it is smaller / Than at first appeared." In the interest of comparison extension, I'd like to opine that the tradition that Ashbery and Stempleman are plugging into here has as much to do with Bertolt Brecht, and his famous alienating techniques, than with any poet in the Modern or Post-Modern

canon (though of course Brecht also wrote poetry.) Brechtian alienation gives us characters that we are not meant to identify with. Given his very catholic taste in art, it is certainly likely that Ashbery would incorporate Brechtian alienation techniques into his poems, and Stempleman has followed suit. It is also worth noting that while sophisticated techniques are employed to create a certain ambience around an amorphous character, we nonetheless have a linear narrative here. Just as “A Man of Words,” despite some opacity, tells a story (literary grandeur gone to seed), so Stempleman’s poem tells a story too. Temporality extended (the day going on “forever,” sunlight trying to get in “for a very long time”) gives a sense of stasis, while the title of the poem tells us that, unlike Eliot’s “Prufrock,” we are looking at a poor man (“old t-shirts” is another clue) wasting away. Rather than Ashbery’s faded grandeur, Stempleman gives us grandeur that never was, is not, and can never be. It would be a bit of a stretch, but you could see in “sunlight” a metaphor for the creative process. Yet this potential saving grace is thwarted, and the ruination that ends Ashbery’s “Man of Words” is also in evidence here.

It would seem that the ability to tell a story, without resorting to epiphanic commonplaces, confessional melodrama, or pseudo-profound mythologizing, is relatively rare in modern poetry. When a middle-of-the-road stalwart like Billy Collins tells a story, we plug up our ears and stick to a party-line that has become rote: give us inquiry, give us exploration, do not give us hokey generalizations and anecdotal pap. What is remarkable about Ashbery, and Stempleman after him, is that a story is *half-told*, a narrative *half-presented*, in such a way that we are invited to create a story along with the poet. In this specific case, Stempleman’s language leans towards the homely (in contrast to Ashbery’s more baroque tilt): laundry, socks, and sheets. The combination of quotidian items and an incompletely sketched, though obviously alienated character, who moves through the poem in a kind of ellipse, is novel. To bring biography into the equation, Ashbery is an urban poet; New York and New York life constitutes part of his *métier*. Stempleman is rooted in the Mid-Western (based as he is in Iowa City); homeliness substitutes for urbanity, domestic detail for baroque. Yet the mood, the ambience, is strangely similar.

An even greater quotient of palpability, and affectivity, is visible in “The Retired Couple”:

Stop licking the bread
before calling me into that impossible position again.
The night to remember is impatiently waiting
to be left alone.
It is said there is a greenhouse in this night,
filled with a kind of bamboo
that can tend to itself.
I mean, that’s actually why it’s there.
To live without us, without so much as a visit,
doing whatever it is the unthinkable do.

On the surface level, this poem brings to light another predilection that binds Eliot to Ashbery, and then Ashbery to Stempleman; aphorism. Ashbery’s famous “The night, as usual, knew what it was doing” (not actually from *Self-Portrait*) is echoed here by Stempleman’s “The night to remember is impatiently waiting/to be left alone.” With Stempleman, as with Eliot and Ashbery, aphorism becomes a way of building what is durable from what is memorable. Like an affecting bit of melody, these lines stick in the reader’s head without effort, rendering the poem a persistent presence, something ineluctable. The substance of this particular phrase is the same kind of desolation visible in “The Apartment,” only this is a two person, rather than a one person scenario. This heightens the emotional tension, ups the ante, as in Ashbery’s “Poem in Three Parts.” It is also worth noting that something is in this poem that is *not* in Ashbery (or most Eliot); the use of conversational diction we see in “I mean, that’s actually why it’s there.” It is important to remember that Stempleman is, in fact, a younger poet writing in 2008 America. The overt and

excellent classicism of his work would tend to elide this from his profile, but at odd moments such as this, colloquial America jumps into the picture. This is not a fault, and it is to Stempleman's credit that he is able to mix different worlds of language use so effectively.

Ashbery and Stempleman both deal with issues of emotional entanglement. Yet their approach is oblique enough so that, as with storytelling in these poems, we are encouraged to participate. The first two lines of Stempleman's poem are potently ambiguous: "Stop licking the bread / before calling me into that impossible position again." Beyond the brutal sting of a near end-rhyme, what is enunciated here could be a reference to the sexual, the emotional, the spiritual, or any combination or permutation of these. "Impossible position," of course, implies that this retired couple no longer have sex, that physical intimacy has become an impossibility. Yet this is fertile ground for glossing; "licking the bread" could refer to money, or the ravages of age that have forced these two to eat lightly. "Licking the bread" is also repellent, an image of repulsion (leading us back to the Brechtian.) We are not invited to feel along with these two; we may feel like we're looking down the wrong end of a telescope. "Licking" is, or maybe, overtly sexual, so that thematically we have both a kind of avowal and denial in two lines. In short, the way Stempleman opens the poem may give the reader a swift kick in the gut, such as we see when Ashbery writes, in "Farm," "Living with the girl / Got kicked into the sod of things."

I don't have many gripes with *Facings*. I find all of it admirable, some of it stunning. However, I have taken the initiative here and compared it to a masterpiece. If I'm not arguing for parity, it would seem fair that I should lay out some reasons that *Facings* is not a masterpiece on a level with *Self-Portrait*. Very little has been said or written about Ashbery's sensuality. People tend to think of him as an intellectual poet. Yet, *Self-Portrait* is full of sensual details, and it is part of the greatness of the book that it melds the sensual and the intellectual so seamlessly. Stempleman can be a little barren this way, a little short on the sensual details, the "limpid, dense twilight(s)," "smoking dishes," "snake plant(s) and cacti" we see in Ashbery's book. Shortly, what is abstract in Stempleman is more or less equal to what is abstract in Ashbery; what is not in Stempleman is the palpable half of the equation. There is more breath in Ashbery's line, more expansiveness, than is found in Stempleman's rather crimped line; Stempleman, in his lesser poems, tends to rely on the merely clever. Yet, Ashbery did not come to *Self-Portrait* until he was in his late forties; Stempleman released this book at age 30. As an unbiased observer, there would seem to me to be little reason not to believe that, in time, Jordan Stempleman could write a book that would achieve absolute parity with Ashbery, and set the poetry world on its ear all over again.

The Conspiracy Against Poems

(2010)

There is no historical evidence to suggest that during the Romantic era, something called “Poetics” existed. At the time, Wordsworth and Coleridge, both identifiable as “Lake” poets, initiated investigations of a theoretical nature, centered on poetry. These investigations were one of Coleridge’s *métiers*; Wordsworth rarely identified himself as something other than a poet. The controversies that surrounded Wordsworth, from the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* forwards, were centered jointly on his poems and the theories that buttressed them. Why is it that in 2010, a majority of poets, particularly those toiling in experimental milieus, seem both more grounded in and more stimulated by theories than by the poems they bolster? What is this nebulous entity, “poetics,” and how has it sapped the life out of what it is meant to serve? The chief weakness of the pursuit of “poetics,” as I see it, is that it puts premiums on two red herrings—novelties and political correctness. “Poetics,” as practiced by the bolder American universities, wants to investigate the newest of the new, anything (striated, of course, within the taut bounds of political correctness) that has not been done before. But practicing “poetics” creates and perpetuates its own kind of romantic ideology—an unthinking and uncritical belief in one’s self-representations as planted firmly in the new, fresh, and bold. This insidious addiction to novelty cuts off poetics from a serious engagement with poetry’s history. It upholds the post-modern ethos that history is essentially a master narrative created in a homogenous vacuum, and thus worthy to be trashed. Why poetics configures a conspiracy against poems is that it bifurcates poetry, as a realm, into two realms (poetry and theory) and dictates that poems should serve theory and not vice versa.

Poets weaned on poetics never quite reconcile themselves to the reality that poems spun out of flimsy theoretical material cannot have any great or striking impact, either in the long or the short term. All this movement towards theory and concept is mirrored in other art forms; but as the post-modern impulse ages, it may be seen that when taken to an extreme, as it has been in experimental poetry, it creates such an aura of rapid obsolescence around new poetry that one wonders why new poems are being written at all. As the novelty aspect of poetics pushes for newness and gimmick-consonance, the political correctness angle further sharpens things against the emergence of poems. Simply put, poetics is mainly a construct established and put into propulsive motion by white, middle-class academics; and as multiculturalism has emerged as a subsidiary branch of post-modernism, a sense of guilt moves participants not only towards the outré but towards anything ethnic or deviant. The problem with poetics generally is that there is little quality control. The conceit of post-modern poetics is that there is no such thing as “quality”; quality is a teetering edifice erected by hegemonic white males to reinforce a master narrative patched up against invasion. Yet the way post-modernists striate things cuts off the levels of nuance within consensus opinions (borne out or subtly shifted over long periods of time) that build canons. Could it be possible that poems sometimes last because they have quality? If quality is not completely subsumed in evanescence, then both novelty and political correctness approaches become quixotic arrows shot at wavering targets. But the point is that in many circles these approaches have become standardized. Generations are now beginning to emerge who have been weaned on these approaches. The upshot is that poets have been formed who respond to theory first, poems second. If poems are a subsidiary branch of theories, then poetry as an endeavor has become so bastardized and decadent that it has ceased to be itself. I want to argue for the permanent preponderance of poems over poetics, and that poems, rather than poetics, need to be starting the fires that add luster to our lives as artists.

There is obviously a neat meta-irony at work here. If this piece starts any fires, it may seem, in the short term, to annihilate itself as poetics qua poetics, willy-nilly. But the larger issues may make the endeavor

worthwhile—that post-modern theory may be killed by artists with art, and if the first baby steps remain theoretical, so be it. What kind of poem, in 2010, could start a fire? Wordsworth’s arsonist techniques involved what he deemed a new kind of language. This is what, at the risk of growing tautological, we need now—a new kind of technique. This language, not *qua* poetics but beyond poetics, would have to eschew certain kinds of novelty and political correctness. It isn’t enough to wish for a return to narrative—it needs to be determined what a post-post-modern narrative is (and I freely admit that post-modern is important enough that it needs to be assimilated). The inescapable accusation that follows hard upon these assertions is of regressive conservatism—that moving into a new language world that has consonance with narrative and engages the entire history of poetry is tantamount to going backwards. Yet, it has not yet been widely noted that post-modernism has pushed the art-forms it has infiltrated so far in narrow directions that there is no room for any movement but a backwards one. In an experimental landscape dominated by poems impoverished on both sound and sense levels, to argue *for* sound and sense becomes a radical move. Thus, sound and sense, the ostensible pillars riveting poems to the ground that they might ascend, become signifiers of detested Romantic impulses, holding out bogus claims of transparency and dangerous delusions of grandeur. In such a landscape, the way forward is the way back, because it must be. For every gimmicky vista that opens up and is instantly thwarted, poets lose more of the capacity to both appreciate and generate the kind of texts that make poetry worthwhile—texts that find inventive ways and shrewd angles with which to create the balance of sound and sense that is the hallmark of durable poetry. Poetry that is truly inventive does not need to entail gimmickry—nor does it need to recreate Romantic sincerity, Victorian sonority, Modernist objectivity or post-modern acerbity. And because invention cannot be anticipated, it would be destructive for me to predict what form it will take or how it will be disseminated.

Poetry is shrewish. For poems to come along and start fires, they would have to burn through enormous resistances. The reason, historically borne out, is that movements become entrenched, and entrenched movements have a tremendous capacity for denial, obliviousness, and discouragement. Because poetry contexts do not entail gross, or even minor, amounts of capital being made or spent, the rewards poets work for are more or less intangible. As such, there is a tremendous delicacy to poets that often congeals into rigidity. That mature poets are often stiffened into rigid postures, and demand degrees of obeisance, necessitates that younger poets receive strong encouragements to conform or be killed. It is also inevitable that each generation will raise only a few poets above the crowd. Nevertheless, to the extent that poets are willing to take up cudgels, a preponderant sense of poems is worth fighting for. Post-modernism has been attenuated into something quite tame; to the extent that the only leaps left to make are, at least in the short term, backwards leaps (into narrative, emotion, sonority) means that the post-modernists expunged too much from what poetry had been before they put up their grayish fortresses. Yet this cannot be a manifesto, because I do not wish to promote any agendas. The essential agenda here is to create, if possible, a context in which poets can decide for themselves the best means of arson, because these grayish fortresses need to be burnt to the ground. It is over the ashes of the moribund that we invent; and if what we invent is poems, and if the poems are built sturdily enough, we do not need to worry that we will appear grayish to whoever succeeds us. That this work needs to be accomplished in different solitudes, rather than in groups, is worth considering; isolation is not merely Romantic, it may be a job requirement. Clannishness and conformity are the major enemies here.

Acknowledgements

The Argotist:

Century XX after *Four Quartets*
Entitlements: Post-Modernism, Capitalism, and the Threat to Poetry's History
On the Necessity of Bad Reviews
The Conspiracy Against Poems

Jacket:

Wordsworth @ McDonald's
On Jordan Stempleman's *Facings*

Word for Word:

The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry
Loving the Alien

Stoning the Devil:

Anything with an Edge: Rethinking Post-Avant